

Andy Birkey, *Minnesota Independent*

'It's foolish to even talk about cutting nutrition for women who are nursing or preparing to deliver a child.'

"Dumb." That's how Rep. Betty McCollum characterized proposed cuts to federal family planning funding and a Republican effort to defund Planned Parenthood. At a St. Paul Planned Parenthood clinic Thursday, she also noted that Republicans refused to cut Pentagon funding for NASCAR, but remain adamant about cuts she says could have devastating effects for Minnesota women and children.

Planned Parenthood of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota president Sarah Stoesz introduced McCollum at the press event.

"It's a challenging time for women's health and for all of us who care about women in this country," she said. "We've been under quite an attack," referencing conservative bloggers' campaign against the health care nonprofit as well as congressional actions to bar federal funds from going to its clinics.

"We do provide abortion services - that's true we do - it's about 5 percent of what we do, but primarily what we do is protect the lives and health of women," she said.

To underscore that point, a clinic patient told the story of her sister, who lives in rural Minnesota near Mankato and whose life she says was saved by the health care group.

"Planned Parenthood is the reason my sister's cervical cancer was found early and treated successfully," she said. "My sister's story has a very happy ending because of Planned Parenthood."

GOP budget cuts in the U.S. House would eliminate federal Title X funding, a part of which helps support cancer screenings at clinics such as Planned Parenthood's.

"Who would have thought that we would have to be concerned about women's reproductive rights, women's rights in 2011 in America," she said.

She said that the proposed cuts and calls to defund Planned Parenthood involve debates over abortion, but the services of Planned Parenthood are much broader.

"Yes, there are needed at times - it should be extremely rare and in a moment of difficult emotional crisis for women - to look at having an abortion, but that's 5 percent of what Planned Parenthood does," said McCollum.

"Ninety-five percent of what Planned Parenthood does is the first line of defense in women's reproductive health and total overall health," she added.

She continued, "We can make smart cuts or we can make dumb cuts - and cutting Title X is a dumb cut."

In the Republicans' proposed budget, Title X funding would be completely slashed from the federal budget, and those funds are used for health care screenings for women and birth control services. Under federal law, the funds cannot go to abortion services.

Republicans targeting WIC as well

The GOP is also proposing cuts to the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program.

"We heard defense spending was off the table, that we could not cut defense spending, but what the House decided we needed were two different engines for one piece of military equipment and that we had to protect the military's ability to purchase decals for NASCARs," she said.

"I think there's room to cut in the Pentagon. There should be room for children, and women who are expecting, to have access to basic nutrition in the United States of America."

McCollum has been a major force in trying to cut NASCAR funding from the federal budget, a cause that resulted in death threats being sent to her office.

"And they are talking about more cuts," she continued, adding that a government shutdown is looming. "No more of these stupid, dumb cuts that are going to hurt women, hurt families, and hurt communities. It's so foolish to even talk about cutting nutrition for women who are either nursing or preparing to deliver a child."

McCollum, who recently visited Yemen where citizens are calling for Democratic reforms and more rights for women, said she spoke with people who were surprised by Republicans' plans to cut programs for women and children.

"When they pick up the paper and read that we are cutting it off, they said, 'This isn't the America we know,'" she said.

Ultimately, she said that the majority of Americans support Title X programs - even Republicans.

"There are a lot of Republicans and independents that support access to mammographies, cervical cancer screenings and ensuring families can plan by having access to birth control," she said.

"We can't let a small group of people hold us hostage on the way forward in the United States."